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# Tackling stigma and promoting recovery through art: The Graffiti project.

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## Introduction

Stigmatising attitudes and misconceptions about people with severe mental illnesses such as psychosis, severely affect the lives of individuals with these conditions. Research suggests that members of the general public who have more knowledge about mental illness and more personal contact with those affected, are less likely to endorse stigmatising attitudes (Holmes et al., 1999). Service users themselves also place great importance on social contact with peers as an essential part of their recovery. Several educational interventions to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma have been undertaken, incorporating contact with those affected by illness and a range of novel educational methods (Gaebel & Baumann, 2003; Pinfold et al., 2003).

The aims of this pilot intervention programme were to:

- raise awareness and challenge negative stereotypes associated with psychosis within young people and other members of the local community.
- engage and encourage service users to share their experiences of psychosis and socialise with young people from their local community.

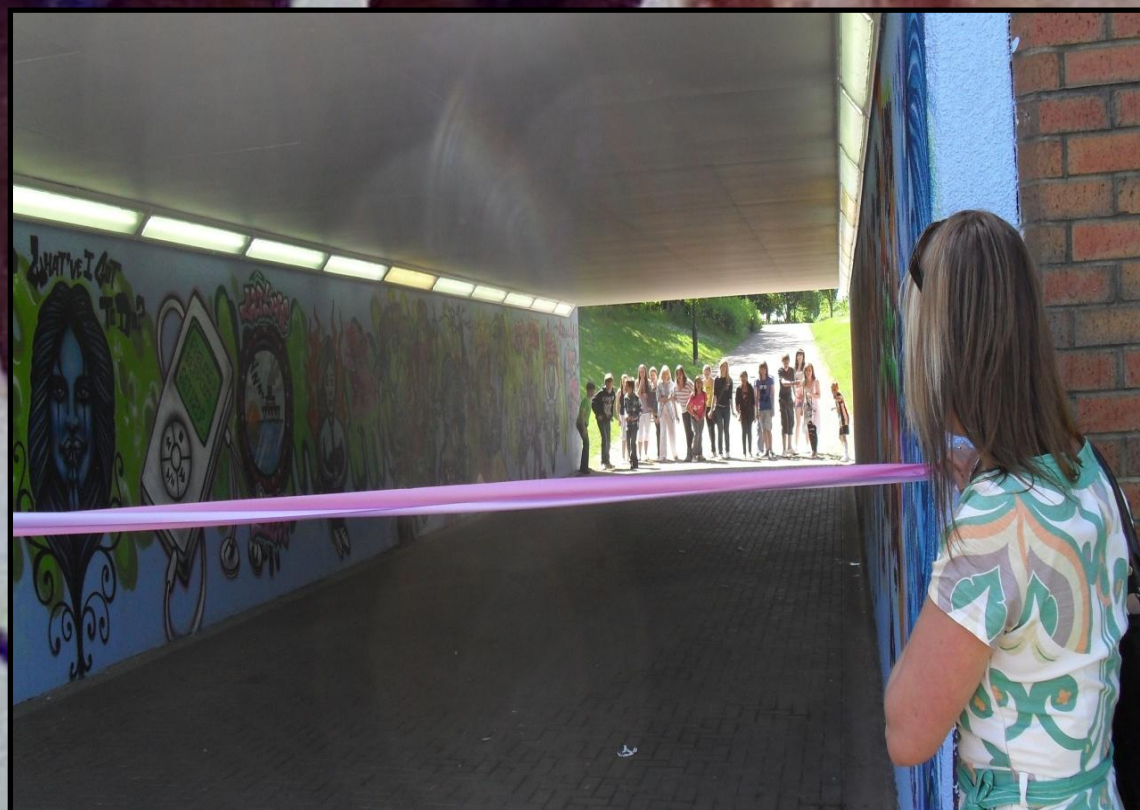
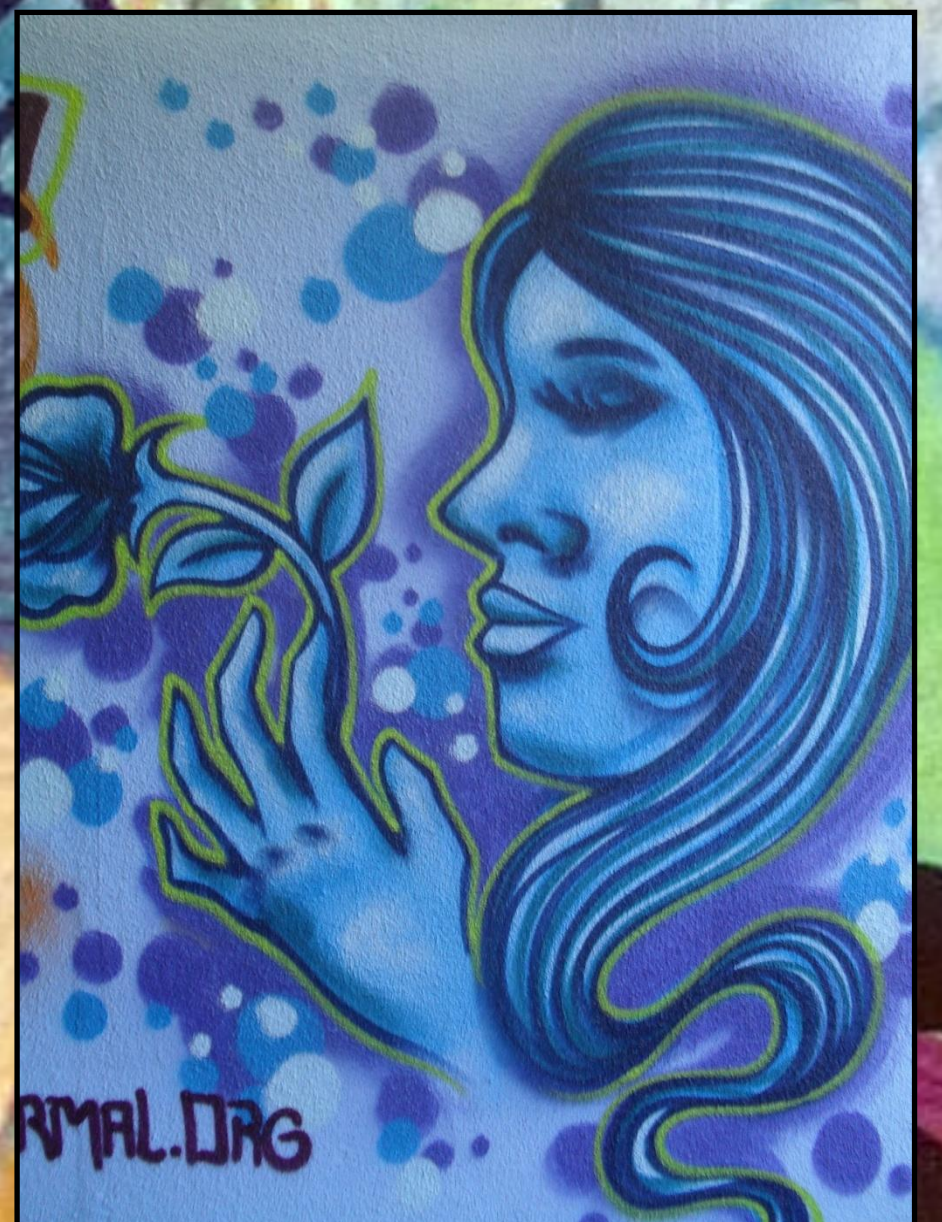


## The Graffiti Project

The project was undertaken in the North East of England and facilitated by clinicians from the local Early Intervention in Psychosis service. Students from a local secondary school were invited to take part in a mental health awareness programme which would lead to the renovation of a rundown underpass with messages and images associated with psychosis and other mental health issues. In total 30 students, aged between 12-17 years of age participated in the project.

Phase I of the project involved 10 workshops spanning a total of 12 weeks and focussed upon pupils' current understanding of psychosis, its causes and preventions. During several of these workshops, service users described their personal experiences of becoming ill, their treatment and recovery as well as taking questions from the pupils. Pupils and service users were then given time to interact and discuss potential images and narratives which could be transferred to the underpass.

Phase II of the project saw the renovation of the underpass which took place over a five day period in May 2010. The underpass was chosen based upon its proximity to a local park and cricket ground often frequented by families, young people and cricket supporters. With the help of professional graffiti artists and the local council, service users and pupils were able to personally add their chosen images to the underpass.



## The Evaluation Process

All participating pupils and service users were invited to take part in focus groups or one to one interviews in order to discuss their learning experiences, their achievements and what they had enjoyed about the graffiti project. All data collected at this stage was analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

One theme that became apparent during analysis was that the project gave service users "confidence" and gave them a chance to tackle stigma in their own personal way:

*"I felt a bit embarrassed at first doing this project. I was nervous and it took a lot for me to work with the kids, explaining my psychosis. Now that I have, my confidence has soared... This underpass and my artwork I hope will continue to reduce the stigma around mental issues."*

In terms of the students learning experience many students described having limited knowledge and feeling scared about the words psychosis and mental health. As the project progressed they also came to understand that anyone may develop a mental health problem and that people with psychosis are in many ways just like them (normalisation):

*"I think I was confused and scared at first by the words mental health until the EIP team came to our school to do this project ...but I learned that people are really all the same, some just need help and support when they are feeling low or vulnerable."*

*"By doing the project, I learned that even though you have psychosis, you are not any different to anybody else ... this (project) helped us understand what some people go through."*

Finally (and potentially most importantly of all) it was a relief to find that the students had enjoyed the project:

*"The Graffiti project was awesome!"*

*"It was all great fun – what are we doing next?"*

## Conclusions

Creative "real world" educational projects that engage young people, service users and other members of the local community can increase mental health literacy, challenge stigma, reduce social isolation and promote recovery. Such projects can be undertaken by small community based mental health teams without significantly stretching resources or incurring heavy financial costs.

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## Study Limitations

- 1) The study involved a small group of adolescents without an adequate control group.
- 2) The views of participants may not translate into long term attitudinal and behavioural change.
- 3) At the moment it is unclear how the general public view the transformation of the underpass.

